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Deconstructing Comparative Sport Policy Analysis: Assumptions, Challenges, and New  
Directions

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## Abstract

Despite progress within comparative sport policy analysis over the past two decades and advancements within the broader comparative sociology literature, comparative analysis within sport policy/management remains limited and challenging. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature that explicitly addresses the philosophical, methodological, and practical challenges of comparing sporting nations. We address this shortcoming by developing a framework to interrogate the philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches of comparing sporting nations. In doing so, we review the current state of comparative sport policy research and elaborate on the challenges and limitations of conducting comparative sport policy analysis. Thus, we seek to deconstruct the theory and method of comparative sport policy research by exploring its underlying assumptions and challenges. Ultimately, our broader intention is to reengage and reinvigorate scholarly debate surrounding the philosophical and methodological approaches of comparing sporting nations.

*Keywords:* comparative, methodology, sport policy, high-performance sport, nations

### Deconstructing Comparative Sport Policy Analysis: Assumptions, Challenges, and New Directions

It is the essence of human nature to compare (Landman and Carvalho 2017) and it should then not come as a surprise that comparative research is a central concern for sociologists. Some might even argue that the challenges faced by comparative scholars are fundamental to understanding the very nature of sociology (Øyen 1990, Jowell 1998). In recognising the value of comparison, many scholars have written extensively about the theory and method of comparative research within the sociology and management literature (Øyen 1990, 2004, Baistow 2000, Dogan and Pélassy 1990, Dogan and Kazancigil 1994, Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Harkness 1999, Jowell 1998, Landman and Carvalho 2017, Lijphart 1971, Kohn 1987, 1989, Mills *et al.* 2006, Ragin 2006, 2014, Sartori 1970, 1994, Schuster 2007). Despite these advancements, however, there remains a dearth of literature that focuses on the philosophical, methodological and practical challenges of comparing sporting nations. For a few exceptions see Henry, Amara, Al-Tauqi, and Lee (2005) and more recently Dowling, Brown, Legg, and Beacom (2018).

One domain where the comparative approach has been applied within the sport policy/management literature is in high performance sport (e.g., Andersen and Ronglan 2012, Bergsgard *et al.* 2007, De Bosscher 2016, De Bosscher *et al.* 2006; De Bosscher *et al.* 2015, 2016, Digel 2002, 2005, Green and Houlihan 2005, Houlihan and Green 2008). Digel (2002), for example, identified a number of societal, organisational and societal-organisational relationship factors that influenced high performance success. Green and Oakley (2001), meanwhile, analysed emerging trends towards uniformity of elite sport systems and identified 10 similarities in approach to elite sport in six countries (UK, Canada, USA, Australia, France, Spain). Green

and Houlihan (2005) then examined policy change across three countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom) and three sports (track and field athletics, sailing, and swimming). Their analysis highlighted the variability in the manner in which countries have prioritised high performance sport, while also pointing to the similarities in the underlying causes or factors that led to such a focus.

More recently, De Bosscher and colleagues built upon previous comparative sport policy studies to develop a theoretical model for comparing sports policy factors leading to international sporting success (abbreviated to ‘SPLISS’). This model was derived from a systematic review of the literature that identified nine factors (or ‘pillars’) and over 100 Critical Success Factors (CSFs) that determined international sporting success. The model was then applied through the employment of a mixed-method design to assess six countries in the first study (SPLISS 1.0; De Bosscher *et al.* 2008, 2009) and 15 in the second (SPLISS 2.0; De Bosscher *et al.* 2015). More recently, others have applied this model to specific sports such as Track and Field Athletics (Truyens *et al.* 2014). Collectively, the above mentioned studies have produced a rich and detailed account of the high-performance sport milieu, and in doing so, have provided important contributions to the mainstream policy, governance and sociology literature in general.

Despite the merit of these contributions, however, conducting comparative sport policy research remains both limited and challenging. Not only is conducting comparative analysis difficult and resource-intensive, but it also faces a whole host of methodological challenges and limitations (Øyen 1990, Jowell 1998, Landman and Carvalho 2017). It is not surprising, therefore, that given the difficulties and challenges of the comparative method, only a handful of scholars have attempted to carry out this type of analysis within the high-performance sport domain. Furthermore, of the limited research that has been conducted, much of it has focused

upon the presentation and justification of empirical findings around key themes that influence high performance sport success. This is most likely because it is these findings that have drawn the most interest and attention of policy-makers and academics. The shortcoming of this empirically-led and stakeholder driven approach to comparative sport policy research is that there has been limited explicit discussion of the philosophical or methodological foundations that underpin the approaches employed to compare high performance sport environments. As Henry *et al.* (2005) suggest “such [philosophical] issues are of fundamental importance because they are crucial to what we can and cannot know about policy, what different methods can and cannot tell us, and how different claims to policy knowledge might be valid” (p. 481). How then might it be possible to overcome the challenges of existing approaches and can we find alternative ways to compare sporting nations? The answer is to start with a focused discussion on the theory and methods of existing approaches to comparing sport policy. Through this process we seek to develop a benchmark that can be used to create clearer and new approaches to comparative sport analysis.

This discussion builds on and out from our previous work already undertaken by Dowling *et al.* (2018). In our previous work, we identified the challenges and limitations of comparative sport policy analysis through examples drawn from the Paralympic domain. In particular, Dowling and colleagues drew upon the wider sociological and management literature to identify the epistemological, methodological and practical issues of establishing a comparative research agenda within the Paralympic sport domain. Many of these issues, we suggest, are applicable to, and have direct implications for, all scholarship attempting to compare sporting nations. This paper thus builds upon, and to a large extent represents an evolution in thinking of, the work of Dowling *et al.* (2018). In particular, we elaborate further upon the challenges and

limitations identified by Dowling and colleagues, and in doing so we present a comprehensive framework for identifying the philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches of comparing sporting nations (see Table 1). This framework is then applied to the high-performance sport domain (see Table 2) to identify and elaborate further upon the philosophical and methodological approaches adopted in order to identify potential avenues and new directions for comparative sport policy research.

As a final caveat to this discussion, it is important to note that our intention with deconstructing comparative sport policy research is not simply to critique from the ‘sidelines’ of the comparative sport policy debate. Adopting such an approach, we suggest, would be unconstructive. Rather, we adopt what Øyen (1990) referred to as a comparativist<sup>1</sup> (Øyen 1990) approach where we believe that the advancement of comparative sport policy research can only occur through further questioning of its underlying philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches. It is in this sense that we seek to deconstruct comparative sport policy theory and methods to explore further the assumptions and challenges of it. Our broader intention is then to reengage and reinvigorate scholarly debate surrounding the philosophical and methodological approaches (i.e. the theory and method) of comparing sporting nations.

**\*\*\*insert Table 1: summary of comparative sport policy challenges, limitations and strategies about here\*\*\***

**\*\*\*insert Table 2: philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches of comparative elite sport policy studies about here\*\*\***

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<sup>1</sup> Øyen’s (1990) typology distinguishes four types of comparative researchers: *Purists* who believe that comparative analysis is no different to any other kind of sociological research; *Ignorants* who actively pursue comparative analysis without any consideration of the added complexities of the comparative methodology; *Totalists* are consciously aware of the many stumbling blocks in comparative research but deliberately choose to ignore them for pragmatic reasons; and *comparativist* acknowledge the above points of view but argue that the advancement of comparative research can only occur through further questioning of the distinctive characteristics of comparative analysis.

### **Comparing Sporting Nations: Philosophical Assumptions and Methodological Approaches**

The following section outlines the general challenges and limitations of conducting comparative sport policy research. More specifically, we use the questions posed by Dowling *et al.* (2018) as a point of departure to develop a framework to identify the challenges and limitations of comparing sporting nations (see Table 1). In doing so we delve into the philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches adopted by comparative sport policy researchers to review the progress of research within this area (see Table 2).

#### **Philosophical assumptions (ontology and epistemology) – why compare?**

The acknowledgement of a researcher's philosophical position and the types of knowledge claims it produces remains an important (if not central) challenge within the general comparative literature (Øyen 1990, Landman and Carvalho 2017) and the comparative sport policy domain specifically (Henry *et al.* 2005). Philosophical perspectives allow us to understand what we can and cannot know about sport policy and what insights we might gain from them (Henry *et al.* 2005). Understanding different philosophical traditions enables us to see how exactly researchers' ontological and epistemological positions can lead to different views of how to compare nations. This includes the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, the types of research questions/hypothesis asked, the choice of data collection strategies and analysis, and the types of conclusions drawn (see Table 1 and Table 2 row one).

We suggest that much of the debate and differences within comparative sport policy analysis is fundamentally rooted in different epistemological traditions, which perhaps explains why some scholars have sought a positivist 'one size fits all' unifying model in order to compare nations – an approach that Henry *et al.* (2005: 481) referred to as the pursuit of 'nomothetic, law-like generalisations'. De Bosscher and colleagues' (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008, De Bosscher *et al.*



2015) attempt to benchmark sport policy factors that led to international sporting success across nations conducted research using a singular model of how to produce high performance athlete success. Other scholars, meanwhile have rejected the rationalist and structuralist approach in favour of more critical realist or interpretivist explanations of sport policy (e.g., Green and Houlihan 2005, Andersen and Ronglan 2012). Andersen and Ronglan (2012), for example, adopted a post-positivist philosophical approach to examine the similarities and differences of elite sport development in Nordic countries. Rather than pursuing law-like generalisations, the authors attempted to uncover the complexities and the changing nature of these sporting nations.

The outcome of these epistemological differences, we suggest, has been the adoption of two fundamentally different approaches to comparative sport policy analysis. On the one hand, some scholars have favoured large-scale, rational-economic approaches that have involved the development and application of theoretical frameworks that have been deductively applied to empirical data to identify the structural similarity and differences between sporting nations. De Bosscher *et al.* (2006), for example, developed a nine-pillar (SPLISS) framework that was derived from previous studies and a systematic review of the comparative and sporting literature. They then applied the SPLISS framework to six (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008) and later 15 countries (De Bosscher *et al.* 2015). Others have questioned this deductive, template-driven approach and chosen instead to make small-scale comparisons of similar sporting nations through an inductive approach (e.g., Andersen and Ronglan 2012; Green and Houlihan 2005). Green and Houlihan (2005), for example, chose to compare three arguably comparable nations, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada on the basis that they had similar sporting cultures, structures, interests and economies.

Given the fundamental differences in these two approaches, it is important that comparative scholars outline and acknowledge their philosophical position. This then helps avoid what Grix (2010) refers to as ‘talking past one another’ (p. 176) and enables others to better understand the interrelationships of key components of research (i.e. logical inference and methodological coherence). Researchers then avoid confusion when discussing theoretical debates. The rest of the discussion below recognises the philosophical and epistemological positions identified in the existing approaches to comparative sport policy research in order to avoid Grix’s concern of ‘talking past one another’. However, as we will identify below, there are also alternative approaches to comparative research that do not share these philosophical assumptions and will have entirely different methodological considerations.

### **Purpose/goal of comparing**

Closely linked to the above philosophical acknowledgements is the consideration of the overall purpose and goal of conducting comparative sport policy analysis. Again, much like the philosophical assumptions that underpin comparative research, decisions regarding the overall purpose/goal of research should not be left to the reader to infer and should be presented explicitly (see Table 1 row 2). The first challenge for comparative researchers, therefore is being clear of the overall purpose and goal of the research, what is the motivation for the study, how are the questions derived (from an external funder or researcher generated) and what is the perceived impact on policy (Øyen 1990, Dogan and Pélassy 1990, Henry *et al.* 2005 Landman and Carvalho 2017). Many sport scholars have been explicit in this regard (see Table 2 row 2). With De Bosscher *et al.* (2015), for example, the key research questions articulate the attempt to understand which (and how) sport policies lead to international sporting success in 13 nations and 3 regions.

Landman and Carvalho (2017) list four key reasons for carrying out comparative research: description, classification, hypothesis, and prediction. Descriptive studies develop detailed accounts of particular nations in order to understand a particular context in an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism (Dogan and Pélassy 1990). An example here is Digel's (2002) study of the top ten track and field athletics nations (by total medal count). This was a detailed descriptive account of the general social conditions, sport systems, general features, and system-environmental factors that explained high performance success. Classification studies, meanwhile attempt to reduce complex social realities through the identification of common features through categorisation and the creation of typologies (see Dennis and Grix, 2012, for a simplified version of this). The development of hypotheses and theory is the third reason for pursuing comparative studies. Here, comparative researchers search for factors that explain what has been previously described and classified. De Bosscher and colleagues' SPLISS and SPLISS 2.0 studies are perhaps good examples of this, whereby the researchers were interested in identifying the factors responsible for international sporting success and then applying them to specific nations. The final approach is predictive, where researchers seek to make predictions based upon generalisations made from comparisons. From our review of the literature, we have not found any comparative sport policy scholars using this approach.

For Landman and Carvalho (2017), the above four reasons are not mutually exclusive and this also was reflected in the sport policy literature. De Bosscher et al.'s (2006) SPLISS approach can be viewed as an attempt to classify nations but also as 'testing' a generated theory (i.e. the SPLISS framework). Landman and Carvalho's (2017) four purposes do, however, have a hierarchical ordering from lower (i.e. descriptive) to higher (i.e. predictive) with the latter considered more ambitious and difficult to achieve. Furthermore, each of the four purposes

comes with its own unique set of challenges and limitations. Descriptive studies, for example, produce detailed accounts with the inherent risk of producing too descriptive and arguably non-generalisable accounts. Classification studies, meanwhile have the potential to reduce the complexities of social reality to the point of becoming meaningless. Hypothesis and prediction studies are also not only difficult but have the challenge of needing to clearly delineate the nature of the relationship between variables. The issue faced by comparative sport policy scholars, then, is to be aware of how one's philosophical assumptions link to the overall goals and purpose of undertaking comparative analysis and the inherent challenges of each.

### **Unit of analysis**

Another key issue in comparative sport policy research is the unit of analysis chosen for study. The issue of selecting an appropriate unit of analysis – the major entity that is being studied – is ontologically and epistemologically rooted. Issues about what is knowable and how it can be known are connected to methodological choices regarding the overall focus of the analysis (Øyen 1990, Baistow 2000, Dogan and Pélassy 1990, Hantrais 2009, Jowell 1998, Kohn 1987, Mills *et al.* 2006, Ragin 2014, Grix 2018) (see Table 1 row 3). Within the comparative sport policy literature, there seems to be a relatively clear divide between those who have acknowledged that nations are inextricably linked to macro-level concerns (economic, political, population etc.) and those who deliberately chose to ignore or overlook these broader contextual factors and focus instead on the meso-level (see Table 2 row 3). We would suggest herein, and Dowling et al. (2018) concludes that, it is not possible to separate or ignore the macro level factors as they have a significant impact on the policy process even if they are beyond the control of sports administrators.

Ragin (2014) elaborates further on this issue by describing the former as *comparativists*, those who choose to deliberately engage with or define macro entities and *non-comparativists*, who treat such notions as abstractions that need not be operationalised. Despite these differences, however, two assumptions have underpinned both *comparativist* and *non-comparativist* sport policy scholarship alike. The first assumption is that nation states are the most appropriate unit of analysis to make comparisons, as they are commonly understood and many international events use countries to structure international competitions. Nation states are therefore seen as relatively stable, enduring, and are in comparative research, often treated as homogeneous entities (Dogan and Pélassy 1990, Hantrais 2009, Jowell 1998). The rationale for why comparative sport policy scholars choose nations states is understandable as

...the world is divided according to these administrative units (countries), and since much of the infrastructure available for comparative research is tied to the territories enclosed by national boundaries, it becomes seductively convincing to use such units in comparative studies (Øyen 1990, p. 2).

This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons. First, there are more countries recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) than the United Nations – 206 recognised National Olympic Committees vs. 193 member states of the United Nations. This indicates not only the extent and breadth of the Olympic Games' movement in general but also the malleability of defining nation states. A recent example of this is the Russian athletes who competed as Authorised Neutral Athletes at the 2017 World Athletics Championships in London. Second, the geographical boundaries of a nation state can be subject to change depending on political and social development. Consider, for example, the creation and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia or the recent attempts to

create a unified Korean team at the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics. Third, there may be a danger of presenting the nation state as a homogenous entity overlooking fundamental heterogeneous factors such as cultural, ethnic and social differences that divide them. Consider for example the longstanding issues surrounding the separation of Quebec in Canada, or the potential independence of Scotland within the UK. Øyen (1990) supports this viewpoint by arguing that ‘within variation [in a particular country] may sometimes be greater than between variations [between countries]’ (p. 7). Other academics have adopted a more critical stance arguing, ‘*intra*-country variations make inter-country comparisons untenable’ (Baistow 2000, p. 10).

### **Methodological - how to compare?**

Once a researcher knows why they want to conduct a comparative research project and the unit of analysis to do so they need to consider the specifics of how this will be pursued. To help us understand this issue, we identified a number of common challenges and themes from the comparative sociology, management and sport policy literature. Based upon our assessment of the dominant approaches to comparing sporting nations, the first decision is deciding what data to measure. The second is then trying to ensure equivalence (including construct, sample, and function) among the nations being studied. The third is how to collect data and the fourth is how to present data once it has been collected.

#### **Selecting countries and variables**

It is clear from the above discussion that most comparative sport scholars have proceeded to use the nation state as their primary unit of analysis. Immediately following this decision, however, is yet another important methodological choice regarding the number of countries to compare (Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Henry *et al.* 2005, Jowell 1998, Landman and

Carvalho 2017, Ragin 2006, 2014) (see Table 1 and Table 2 row 4). If the researcher selects too few countries they run the risk of under representation and lack of generalisability. If they select too many countries this may generate vast data sets that requires extensive data reduction strategies with the danger being a reduction of meaningful comparisons to tables and graphs. This could then result in the analysis becoming lost in what Ragin (2006) described as ‘the doldrums of template driven research’ (p. 635). The adoption of either approach (i.e. too ‘many’ or ‘few’ countries) is largely dependent upon the initial premise of the study, but both are susceptible to the issue of non-sample equivalence discussed previously (Ebbinghaus 2005). To help comparative researchers, Landman and Carvalho (2017) identified three general strategies: comparing many countries, comparing few countries and conducting single country studies. Each of these general strategies is underpinned by ontological and epistemological assumptions with varying strengths and weaknesses. Landman and Carvalho (2017) refer to the issue of selecting countries more generally as a methodological trade-off between the level of abstraction and the scope of countries under examination (see Figure 1). This echoes Schuster’s (2007, p. 100) warning of a ‘research terrain in which (cross national) comparability is traded off against (local) usability’. For Landman and Carvalho (2017), including many countries leads to large-scale, variable-orientated comparisons, often through statistical inferences by controlling for other variables. It is for this reason that large-N scale comparative studies are considered the closest to the experimental method (Lijphart 1971). Comparing fewer countries, on the other hand, involves a focused comparison of select cases in a more intensive manner, attempting to understand the nuance of each case that may take into account the macro, meso and micro factors. Examples of this within the comparative sport policy literature would be Green and Houlihan’s (2005) analysis of policy change within three countries (UK, Canada and Australia).

It is also possible to use a single country with many observations for comparisons (Landman and Carvalho 2017). Single (often outlier/extreme) cases are also particularly useful for comparative research as they produce rich, contextual description and help generate new theory (Eisenhardt 1989).

**\*\*\*insert Figure 1 Landman and Carvalho (2017) few/many countries figure about here\*\*\***

Other academics, such as Ebbinghaus (2005) and Hantrais (2009), have simply distinguished between large-N (i.e. many countries) and small-N studies (i.e. few countries). The former focuses on general dimensions and the relationships between variables at a higher level of abstraction and the latter emphasises an intensive contextual analysis of a select few cases (countries) at a low to medium level of abstraction. It is for this reason that Ragin (2006) refers to large-N studies as ‘variable-orientated’ and small-N studies as ‘case-orientated’. Although there is no agreed upon number of cases that defines large or small-N studies, the general consensus within the literature is that large refers to 20 countries or greater (Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Landman and Carvalho 2017). By this definition (i.e. Large-N >20), most of the comparative research within the sport policy domain can be described as Small-N studies ranging from 2-15 nations. The closest to a large-N study would be the second De Bosscher et al. (2015) SPLISS study.

Another issue with how to conduct comparative studies is choosing a sampling design of how to select nations. Two main approaches are discussed within the comparative literature: most similar systems design (MSSD) and most different systems design (MDSD)<sup>2</sup>. In discussing each of these, the former (i.e. MSSD) involves comparing key features that are different amongst similar countries while controlling for the dependent variable. This approach is particularly

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<sup>2</sup> Comparative methodologists have also put forward alternative approaches to either MSSD or MDSD. Ragin (2006), for example, argued for a reconciliation of these two approaches which he labelled ‘configurational comparative research’



useful for comparing countries within a specific geographical region that share similar features (history, language, religion, culture etc.). Andersen and Ronglan (2012), for example, adopted a MSSD approach by comparing similarities and differences in four Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark) on the basis that they have similar population sizes, socio-economic institutions and strong welfare states. The approach is also consistent with Lijphart (1971) who argued that ‘comparability is indeed not inherent in any given area, but it is more likely within an area than in a randomly selected set of countries’ (p. 689). Similarly, Bergsgard *et al.*’s (2007) study involved the comparison of ‘fairly similar’ (p. 256) countries in terms of economic development, wealth, and education. Bergsgard and colleagues utilised ‘comparative cases’ (Lijphart 1971) in that each case (country) should be characteristically similar in a number of ways (variables). This ‘allow[s] the establishment of relationships among a few variables while many other variables are controlled’ (Lijphart 1971, p. 687). This approach, while methodologically convenient, is likely to result in a limited generalisability beyond the sample. One way in which to avoid the danger of “imprisonment” (Lijphart, 1971, p. 689) within a geographical area is to adopt a theoretical framework that may allow greater generalizations and conclusions to be drawn beyond the nations states involved.

The latter approach (i.e. MDSD) involves deliberately comparing different cases that do not share common features apart from the outcome being explained (Landman and Carvalho 2017). The closest example of this within the sport policy domain is Digel (2002, 2005) who attempted to determine why the top ten sporting nations were more successful than others in track and field athletics. The explanatory outcome (dependent variable) in this case is consistent medal success at the Olympic Games and World Championships. Some sport scholars such as De Bosscher *et al.* (2015) have chosen to not formally state their sampling design as either

MSSD or MDSD, opting instead for a pragmatic approach in that they have invited any nation to participate in their study assuming interest, willingness and ability.

In reflecting upon the comparative sport policy literature, the majority of studies have adopted an MSSD approach, choosing to compare specific (often pre-determined) features of high performance sport systems. Houlihan and Green (2008) for example, used findings from their previous study (Green and Houlihan 2005) as an analytical framework to examine sport policy development in nine nations. Similarly, both SPLISS 1.0 and 2.0 adopted a nine-pillar framework to compare nations. The pillars were created through a thorough and systemic review of the literature and in SPLISS 2.0 a pragmatic/open invitation (self-selected) approach was adopted. From our reading of the literature, it also seems that some comparative sport policy scholars have deliberately chosen to exclude cases, which are fundamentally different to the norm or that do not fit well to pre-determined criteria. De Bosscher *et al.* (2006) excluded the United States (unique collegiate system of sport), China (authoritarian communist) and Russia (authoritarian governance) from their analysis. This may be because they recognise that these extreme cases are so different that comparisons sit well outside of the rest of the cases and therefore analysis becomes more problematic.

Another issue in conducting comparative research is what instrument to use. Here the challenge is selecting variables that sufficiently capture the phenomenon in question versus the feasibility/practicality of collecting it (Øyen 1990, Ebbinghaus 2005, Landman and Carvalho 2017, Lijphart 1971). This is also referred to as the ‘too many variables, too few cases’ problem (Ebbinghaus 2005, Lijphart 1971). Perhaps an erroneous assumption made by comparative researchers is that the more variables chosen for a study results in a more accurate or refined reflection of reality. Landman and Carvalho (2017) forewarn against this type of thinking,

however, arguing that results become meaningless, if too many variables result in similarities and differences (i.e. the comparison) that get lost in the inventories and survey instruments. Researchers may thus be susceptible to getting caught up in their own superfluous detail by observing and recording variation when in reality there is none. Another potential error is overstating similarity without acknowledging the more fundamental differences that underpin different countries. Henry *et al.* (2005) caution against the assumption of policy decisions that are driven by shared underpinning political/cultural issues. Whilst the policy outcome of a high-performance sport might be the same across countries, the culture, politics and institutional infrastructure context might be very different.

In an attempt to respond to the too many variables predicament, some comparative scholars recruited international teams of researchers, sought government funding in each locale, and developed complex and comprehensive operational protocols, in order to collect data in their respective countries. De Bosscher *et al's* (2015) SPLISS 2.0 study involved 58 researchers and 22 policymakers from 15 nations. Nations were invited to participate via email and conference presentations to a wide network of sport policy scholars and sport administrators. Invitations to participate in the project were made on basis of their willingness and ability to independently coordinate and collect the necessary data. The practical and logistical realities of this approach, however, means that the principal researcher is required to identify a researcher (or a research team) within each country who has the interest and capacity to engage in the comparative research process. This could potentially result in co-investigators who are biased due to self-selection.

### **Equivalence**

We have reviewed what data to measure and challenges therein and now turn our attention to trying to ensure equivalence (including construct, sample, and function) among the nations being studied. Equivalence is a complex and multi-faceted issue that involves ensuring that the same phenomenon is being studied across different cases (nations) and that the similarities and differences do not refer to fundamentally different things (Øyen 1990, 2004, Baistow 2000, Hantrais 2009, Jowell 1998, Landman and Carvalho 2017, Mills *et al.* 2006, Schuster 2007). In other words, do the same concepts and instruments in one country mean the same thing in another? Three issues of equivalence will now be discussed in turn: construct, sample and functional.

### ***Construct Equivalence***

Construct equivalence is about ensuring that instruments measure the same variables across different cases (countries) (see Table 1 and Table 2 row 5). If the main aim of comparative analysis is to search for similarities and differences between nations, then it is important to deploy instruments that measure equivalent variables across all cases. This is a frequent and understandable challenge for comparative researchers as variables in one context are not always equal and equivalent in another. For example, despite the vast array of different languages, it is often taken-for-granted that words are equivalently used across all cases. De Bosscher *et al.* (2015), for example, translated their survey instruments and inventories into twelve different languages. Many comparative sport studies do not explicitly discuss equivalence in general or the issue of language and language translation specifically. These types of issues are significant, however, particularly when one can see how nuanced word choices can be in English-speaking countries. While seemingly alike, they use language in a different manner and may comprise fundamentally different institutional frameworks and socio-political contexts

(Jowell 1998). One poignant example in sport policy research is the difficulty in defining the notions of sport, physical activity, exercise and participation. In an attempt to respond to this issue, De Bosscher *et al.* (2015), developed comprehensive *modus operandi* with explicitly articulated definitions of key terms such as elite athlete, coach and performance director (pp. 62-63) and noted, where possible, key terms within their inventories in an attempt to reduce non-equivalence of constructs.

## ***Sample Equivalence***

In addition to trying to ensure that instruments are equivalent, comparative researchers also need to check that their samples are too (Øyen 1990, Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Jowell 1998, Kohn 1987, Schuster 2007) (see Table 1 row 6). Ebbinghaus (2005) argues that comparative researchers often select cases on historical and social rationales, resulting in the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of certain countries. This approach is particularly evident within the comparative sport policy literature – and often for good reason (see Table 2 row 6). Andersen and Ronglan (2012), for example, studied the Nordic nations of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark and they explicitly stated their selection was based on the population size, similar socio-economic and political institutions and strong welfare states. Evidently, this is a deliberate methodological decision in order to enable comparison. Similarly, Bergsgard *et al.* (2007) selected nations on the basis of economic development, wealth and population size. The potential outcome of this approach, whilst methodologically convenient, can be what Ebbinghaus (2005) described as a stratified, rather than random sample – or the problem of contingency. The problem of contingency can in turn lead to what some comparative sociologists (Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Landman and Carvalho 2017) have referred to as selection bias – cases chosen based on a positive outcome resulting in false inferences. In other

words, comparative researchers may have inadvertently selected cases that positively support their own research question or hypothesis. This is not to suggest that the above is the case in work by Andersen and Rongland (2012) and Bergsgard et al (2007) or within other previous comparative sport policy scholarship. Nonetheless, the adoption of a selective or stratified sampling approach does, however, increase the likelihood of the problem of contingency occurring.

### *Functional equivalence*

Once comparative sport policy researchers have overcome construct and sample equivalence issues, they still have to ensure that the data collected has functional equivalence (Øyen 2004, Dogan and Pélassy 1990, Ebbinghaus 2005, Hantrais 2009, Jowell 1998, Schuster 2007, Landman and Carvalho 2017) (see Table 1 row 7). The essence of this issue is that just because data could be used for comparative purposes does not mean it should (Schuster 2007). This problem appears to be particularly applicable for the comparative sport policy domain (see Table 2 row 7) as it seems to rely upon pre-existing (often survey) data in order to make what is believed to be meaningful comparisons. An example from the sporting context is the usage of national participation survey data (e.g., Active Lives Survey – Sport England (2016) and Sport Participation Survey – Canadian Heritage (2013)). In order to make national data sets fully functionally equivalent they would need to be completely standardised. At times, the quality and utility of these types of data sets are questionable in their own right, designed for completely different purposes, employing fundamentally different methodologies in their creation, and producing different metrics that arguably make comparisons meaningless. It is not possible, for example, to compare directly the UK based Active Lives Survey with the Canadian Sport Participation survey as both had different scopes/purposes and employed different

methodologies. In short, they have no functional equivalence compounded by a lack of construct equivalence. Practically, however, these data sets are used because they are the only or best data sets available. Some comparative sport policy scholars have attempted to address this issue by drawing upon larger comparative data sets. De Bosscher *et al.* (2015), for example, adopted the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the Eurobarometer (EB) survey in order to standardise sport participation. These efforts are, however, rare with very few sport scholars explicitly discussing how (if at all) they have ensured functional equivalence.

### **Data collection - access and analysis**

The third primary issue faced by comparative sport policy researchers under the guise of how to conduct comparative studies is collecting the actual data (see Table 1 row 8). Beyond the designing of appropriate data collection instruments and selecting research teams are the practical realities of data collection (Øyen 1990, Hantrais 2009, Landman and Carvalho 2017, Schuster 2007). Most comparative sport policy researchers faced issues related to participant recruitment, data access, researcher convenience and selection bias, ensuring standardised protocols, data time-lag and cross-sectional data limitations, and funding/resource constraints (see Table 2 row 8). Space precludes a fuller discussion of each and so instead we will elaborate on only a few.

The problems of data access are by no means unique to the comparative method and sport policy studies. Nonetheless, given the nature and type (i.e. specificity and breadth) of information sought, it is likely that access to key informants is necessary for effective and meaningful sport policy comparative studies. The key informants are often politicians, governmental officials, and professional administrators working for national sport organisations and agencies who may not want politically sensitive information to be shared. An example of

this tension is evident from De Bosscher *et al's* (2015) study, whereby the UK chose not to be involved as 'many nations were looking at the UK as a best practice benchmark and as such the UK felt less eager to take part in SPLISS 2.0' (p. 67). On this point, Øyen (1990) suggests, many of the stakeholders have a vested interest in comparative studies in that they often give preferential treatment to their own country and seek scientific or even pseudo-scientific evidence to support their own political agendas.

In regard to time lag, the difference between data collection and publication can sometimes be two to four years. De Bosscher *et al.* (2015) referred to this limitation as the 'instant picture' (p. 80) whereby the comparative study examines elite sport statically (i.e. at a single point in time), while recognising that elite sport development is dynamic and constantly evolving. If the common expression 'a week is a long-time in politics' serves to illustrate the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of policy, then the time-lag from the point of data collection to publication (i.e. 2 to 4 years within the comparative sport policy domain) can render comparative data historical at best or outdated at worst. Furthermore, given that national political cycles are not synchronised with each other, or to the cycles of sport, there is a danger of misalignment with data that may be accurate on the day of collection, but does not represent the political reality of the present (Jowell 1998).

### **Data output**

The last set of issues relates to how comparative data is presented, disseminated and utilised to inform strategic decision-making (Øyen 1990, Hantrais 2009, Landman and Carvalho 2017, Schuster 2007) (see Table 1 and Table 2 row 9 and 10). In regard to how comparative data is presented, comparative researchers have to logistically organise and manage large amounts of data. The temptation when managing such large datasets may be to reduce and



simplify findings to make it more manageable and presentable to a lay audience. It is recognised that data reduction is an important and necessary part of the research process, but there is an inherent danger in reducing what is highly rich, detailed and culturally laden to a single table, graph or traffic light system. While tables and graphs may be aesthetically pleasing and/or even politically attractive, they may serve limited explanatory purpose.

Data output issues and how comparative data should be disseminated to a large extent depends upon the original purpose of the study and how studies are funded (Landman and Carvalho 2017). If a study is seeking to produce highly descriptive accounts of a sporting nation, then it is likely that the data will be presented as such. If the data is being used to test causal relationships between variables, then they are likely to be presented very differently. This difference of approaches to data presentation is evident within the comparative sport policy literature with some scholars choosing to present their findings as radar graphs and traffic lights derived from a scoring system of critical success factors (e.g., De Bosscher *et al.* 2008, 2015) and others choosing to present their findings as general statements (e.g., Andersen and Ronglan 2012, Bergsgard *et al.* 2007, Green and Houlihan 2005). What can also be drawn from reviewing the comparative literature is that scholars have deliberately been tentative with their conclusions. This may be prudent science but it might also be an acknowledgement of the methodological limitations and challenges of this type of research. This diversion in the discussion draws attention to the important consideration of how data is being used by both researchers and policy-makers to inform strategic decision making. The extent to which individual countries that participate in the research benefit from their inclusion might also be important to acknowledge. As an example, Schuster (2007) cautions that

...both independent analysts and government agencies find it difficult to resist the temptation of comparing the participation rates in their country to several other

(often carefully) selected countries, and the cultural policy literature is now littered with such comparisons. But too often this temptation has led to reducing the available data to perfunctory comparisons intended to demonstrate one assertion or another or, worse, to constructing crude league tables that are, at the very least, misleading (p. 100).

It is important, therefore, to consider how such comparative research will be used for political purposes that fit specific policy agendas or political arguments, rather than an overall public good (Schuster 2007).

### **Potential Avenues and New Directions for Comparative Sport Policy Research**

This paper has built upon the previous works of Dowling *et al.* (2018) to elaborate further upon challenges and limitations of comparative sport policy analysis. In doing so, we have contributed to the comparative sport policy literature by creating a framework for discussing the philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches of comparing sporting nations (summarised in Table 1). In outlining this framework, we have also interrogated the current progress of, and highlighted a number of challenges faced by, comparative research within the high-performance sport policy domain (summarised in Table 2). Some comparative methodologists have suggested that even if researchers are able to overcome these challenges that comparative methodology may still have only moved from being “deeply suspect to just plain problematical” (Jowell 1998, p.176). Others have been even more critical of comparative methodologies suggesting that they are akin to “damage control” (Kohn 1987, p. 720). Although we do not share the same level of cynicism as either Kohn or Jowell, as *comparativists* (Øyen 1990) we nonetheless share their concerns. We believe the advancement of the comparative (sport policy) research can only occur through further questioning of the distinctive characteristics of comparative analysis. Furthermore, the above comments serve to demonstrate

the extent of the challenges faced by comparative sport policy researchers as they seek to explain similarity and variation across sporting nations.

What then can be drawn from the above discussion regarding the philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches adopted by comparative sport scholars and what might be potential improvements for the comparative sport policy domain? First, it should be noted that many comparative sport scholars do not adopt an *ignorant* (Øyen 1990) viewpoint in that they do not actively pursue comparative analysis without any consideration of the additional complexities of comparative methodology. Rather, it is apparent that comparative sport scholars have gone to considerable lengths to overcome many of the methodological challenges described earlier. In doing so, they have produced robust methodological approaches to comparing sporting nations. Second, it is evident that comparative sport policy researchers have often chosen to adopt a pragmatic or *totalist* approach (Øyen 1990) in that they are consciously aware of many of the stumbling blocks involved in comparative research, but have deliberately chosen to ignore them often for practical reasons. It is our intention with bringing the philosophical assumptions and methodological challenges and limitations to the forefront that comparative sport scholarship might move from a *totalist* to a *comparativist* viewpoint. This recognises that the comparative sport policy domain can only move forward through further questioning of the distinctive characteristics of comparative analysis. Third, there seems to be a clear trend regarding an emphasis on positivist/post-positivist approaches to comparative research. Whilst this is perhaps reflective of the dominance of these philosophical approaches in social and political science in general, nonetheless it should be recognised that these approaches produce certain types of knowledge claims (epistemology) and therefore often adopt a narrow set of methodological approaches to produce comparisons.

Based on these general trends, we see two potential ways forward for comparative sport policy research. We also recognise that these two options are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first option is for comparative sport policy research to continue down the same road. This perspective would continue within the orthodox tradition that has already developed which broadly shares ontological and epistemological assumptions. This approach can then be further refined and expanded to include methodological instruments. In addition, comparative scholars can attempt to transplant their existing methodological approaches to new, uncharted empirical domains in the hope that reveal ‘new’ and interesting insights. The problem with this option, of course is that it does not resolve the more fundamental issues faced by the comparative sport policy domain whereby studies remain both limited and highly resource-intensive. Furthermore, as the comparative sport policy domain begins to mature, we suggest this approach is also likely to produce somewhat ‘marginal gains’ in enhancing our knowledge and understanding.

Perhaps a more fruitful and potentially insightful approach would be to consider alternative ways in which to conduct comparative sport policy research – both philosophically and methodologically. In this sense, we are suggesting a fundamental philosophical and methodological turn in comparative high performance sport scholarship. First, the need for clarity on the foundations of research – that is, a researcher’s ontology and epistemology – is not based on pedantry, but rather on the belief that this is necessary to undertake any ordered thinking, to avoid confusion, clarify and justify the researcher’s methodological choices and lead to the understanding that there is more than one way to undertake comparative research. Our review of the literature suggests that there is an abundance of positivist approaches to comparing sporting nations. Such an approach – with an emphasis on causality and tangible outcomes – is favoured by many high-performance stakeholders and governments alike, yet, it is less good at

understanding the complex social, economical and political context in which sports systems develop. A final reason for foundational clarity is the need to be able to follow – and emulate if necessary – the methodology of a study, including the basis upon which the choice of method and data have been made. Second, a diversity of approaches in comparative sports policy research is more likely to lead to policy transfer and policy learning across cases. The lack of comparative studies on policies adopted by countries hosting sports mega-events (both advanced capitalist and so-called ‘emerging’), for example, has arguably led to the lack of policy learning between countries and the continuation of budget overruns, under-utilised sporting facilities and wasted opportunity costs.

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